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Title of thesis: "Political Consequences of Intra-Village Inequalities in Rural Transformation – A Study of Two Villages in West Bengal"

Synopsis

Rural transformation in India over the last few decades has been marked by considerable change. In the social sphere, a growing body of literature captures the changing nature of castes and their influence. The economic sphere has been transformed by the changes in the agrarian economy, ranging from the decline in the share of agriculture in GDP to large-scale shifts in the occupational pattern. This transformation could increase the extent of inequality in various ways, including the difference between those benefiting from the change and those left behind. Such a transformation is reflected in the ideological and other political changes that have taken place over this period, including the simultaneous emergence of regionalism and the Backward Caste movements. These political trends have been studied at a macro level of individual states going up to larger regions and the country. Yet, at the core of this change is the transformation taking place at the village level, which impacts local politics.

This thesis has tried to explore this local relationship by asking: What is the effect of rural transformation at the village level on inequality and on local politics? More specifically, the objectives of this can be divided into the following sub-themes:

- What are the inequalities generated by the changing occupational structure in a village?
- What are the political processes that arise from this change in the village?
- What is the impact of these political processes on inequalities in the village?

This thesis has attempted to explore these questions through a household survey and qualitative village study conducted in two villages, Amloki and Haritaki, in districts of Purulia and Bankura, respectively, in West Bengal. It attempted to understand the political consequences of the inequalities in the rural transformations of these two villages through a 'process approach' where politics has been understood through the activities of attaining a general arrangement where people have come by chance or choice, a definition of politics given by Michael Oakeshott, which provides a broader approach to capture the nature and dynamics of the transformation process. While existing inequalities in rural change have multidimensional consequences in rural

arrangements, economic and social transformation at the local village level changes people's activities and associations, resulting change in the arrangements. In addition, occupational changes and changes in socio-cultural arrangements have generated inequalities in two villages in West Bengal.

From the study, it has been found that the multidimensional process of changes in the socio-economic arrangements of villages are an aggregated result of various factors such as the struggle to keep the status quo of a certain group of people, emergence of a new set of activities around non-farm works, former agricultural workers joining the non-farm occupational opportunities inside the village, inaccessibility to migrate out increased the competitions amongst the villagers avail the locally available non-farm jobs and patronages from the economically dominant sections. The study was conducted in the villages of West Bengal, which went through some essential economic and political transitions in the last two decades. The learnings from the fieldwork, which is also aligned with the existing literature and the local narratives, show that the external investments in the villages, occupational shifts, an increase of land fragmentation and a decline of the per head land size and leaving agricultural works have given birth to a new group of villagers whose former associations and arrangements have changed along with the transformation of their activities around farm-based occupations. As the agricultural works were abandoned, the older dependency among the landowners, sharecroppers, cold storage owners, and agricultural labourers changed. The establishment of the river dams in both the villages, the acquisition of the land and the influx of different non-farm opportunities have created new sets of demands for compensation and access to livelihood. Land acquisition, distribution, and utilization in West Bengal have already played an essential role in political history.

It is learned through this thesis that even the consequences of land acquisition are also different based on the local arrangements of the villages. Amloki, which is situated in the Purulia, has experienced a recent phase of the land acquisition process where upper caste people had given the majority of their lands for the development of the river dam under the central government development plan. There was an expectation that the compensation would be assured and sufficient. However, when they understood that adequate compensation was not provided, protests against the authority was launched

along with the scheduled caste groups. During this period, West Bengal was also going through a protest movement on land acquisition, but in Amloki, the protestors did not receive any support. This made their movement context-specific and can be understood through the specific activities in which people were involved. The main political opposition of the state launched a movement before the acquired land could be utilised. In Amloki, the river dam was established, and the discontent among the people developed after a few years when they understood that the compensation was inadequate. In the meantime, the local arrangements and livelihood changed to mostly non-farm activities. People also invested their compensation in chit-funds, which eventually failed because of their fraudulent activities. Although the upper castes in the village had also gone through the same economic distress, but they were relatively better off than any other caste groups in the village.

The newly created non-farm activities were coordinated by these upper-caste groups, who were also the former landowners and the employers of the agricultural workers in the village. In the new occupational arrangements where the increased flow of non-farm workers in the village seek work, these upper caste groups become the main controllers and providers. Their control over the Panchayet also demands a mention. The Pradhan of the Panchayet comes from the scheduled caste group as the seat is reserved, but the actual control of the resources remains in the hands of the village's upper castes. The dependency of the lower caste groups (SCs and OBCs) in the village are visible where they are also left with no choice of finding work in the farm sector in the village. In addition to this process, the emergence of businesses and labour contractors is also observable. Former landowners and sharecroppers have also transferred or leased out some of their land to establish brick kilns, where further demands for non-farm work have been generated.

In Haritaki, this transformation pattern is also influenced by external investments and development plan of the government. Like Amloki, occupational transformation can be observed in Haritaki as well. However, contrary to Amloki, no resistance came from the people whose land was taken to develop a river dam. Moreover, when the land was taken and developed, the local villagers, especially those who gave their land, got jobs in the development project. However, such distribution of non-farm jobs was unequal

and accessed more by a particular dominant trading community, the Sahoos. Through the field study it was explored that an entire generation of the Sahoos had received government jobs in those locally created opportunities because of the establishment of the dam. Such benefits changed the economic profile of the Sahoos in the village and made them one of the most dominant groups. Their control over the decision makings at the panchayat level, socio-cultural programmes and providing non-farm job opportunities to the other lower caste groups are visible.

Along with these developments, several government schemes were introduced, controlling of the distribution process of those resources have also become the source of mobilization and created an arrangement inside the village. Development schemes targeted to the rural poor come through the Panchayat. As these economically dominant groups emerged as the main authority who controlled the Panchayat, it was observed that the resources released through these Panchayats had become the material of patronage. Research has also revealed that alongside upper castes, economically dominant groups have actively participated in controlling the processes through which new non-farm opportunities could be manoeuvred. In the case of the accessibility of the newly created non-farm opportunities, they were able to mobilize the benefits more effectively.

The local arrangements of the people were also affected by changes in occupation and related activities. The previous mobilisation methods, the older patron-client relationship and the allegiance to the authority started changing as new sets of demands were created at the bottom. The independent character of such demand generated at the grassroots level has challenged the command polity, which functions at the state level. Transformations in the villages have given birth to unequal wealth development, mainly among those who had the opportunities to access the benefits of the non-farm work opportunities. The socio-political history of the state supports similar groups that had earlier emerged as the major financial support system for the ruling elites. The local narratives aligned with the existing literature about how rural elites had participated in and coordinated the activities to attain specific arrangements in the villages in different regimes.

The study of the two villages revealed that rural transformation has benefitted some people who are leaving agricultural work and able to access alternative opportunities and some are left behind. In the villages, the impact of such transformation has changed the dynamics of the arrangement that was hitherto existing around agricultural works. The emergence of the new elites in the villages has to cater to the changing nature of the demands for which controlling access to non-farm occupation and various poverty alleviation schemes are the primary means to retain dominance. Such development of transaction politics has found its method of insuring the structure of dominance. The inter group competitive patronage has led to violence or the threat of it. It functions more as an element that protects sovereignty of each group. The clashes are based on the attempts to establish supremacy over the channels of resource allocations like, the hiring of wage labourers for rural employment guarantee programmes, allocation of houses and toilets, pensions for the widows etc.

It has been observed that the change in the political sphere of West Bengal in the last two decades is not only the change at the top but a result of an aggregation of new demands at the bottom. The need for direct cash transfer programmes, different social security schemes and government jobs have become the precious resources which are now used to keep the traditional elements of polarization but through the promise or provisions of accessing those. The change in the local socioeconomic activities had created a transformation in the needs of the citizens, leading to a change in the old pattern of control and hegemony through a disciplined party structure. The new association of rural elites in West Bengal are now more sovereign in their activities and in creating an identity, based on their ability to form an arrangement and associations which is beyond any particular political ideology.